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SUBJECT: GOI MAKES FIRST OFFICIAL VISIT TO MEK CAMP; IRAQI
ARMY FORCES FOLLOW

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[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 2658

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Patricia A. Butenis for reasons 1.4 (b)
) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: A GOI team led by Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Salim and including an MFA official made its first visit to the Mujahedin e-Khalq (MEK) at Camp Ashraf on August 18 to prepare for a transfer of security responsibility. The team toured Camp Ashraf and heard from MEK members that they were very concerned about the GOI takeover of security responsibility, largely due to negative GOI statements; wanted the GOI to acknowledge their rights as an organization; and demanded an official GOI written statement of assurances for their safety and protection. Minister Wijdan told the MEK members that the GOI would not acknowledge the right of the MEK organization to exist in Iraq, but while they stayed at Ashraf, they would be protected by the GOI as individuals under Iraqi and international law. In a surprise development, an Iraqi Army battalion arrived outside Ashraf the same day, on the order of the Prime Minister, to prepare to take over security from U.S. forces. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) A GOI team, led by Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Salim conducted its first official visit to the Mujahedin e-Khalq (MEK) at Camp Ashraf on August 18. Minister Wijdan said her goal was to see Ashraf and understand how the camp operates logistically. Task Force 134 (TF134) Commander, Deputy Commander and staff, plus Embassy officers (PolMil Deputy Counselor, Legal Adviser, Senior Refugee Coordinator, PolMilOff, and PolOff) accompanied Minister Wijdan, her team from the Ministry of Human Rights (MoHR), and MFA official Abdel Hadi Fadhil Ahmed, who handles affairs with Iraq's neighbors.

OVERVIEW

[1](#)3. (C) Minister Wijdan's program began with a TF134 briefing at FOB Grizzly, home to the U.S. 504th Military Police Battalion that guards Ashraf, on the camp and the modalities of the U.S. provision of security. Key points from the briefing and discussion:

-- There are approximately 3400 residents in the camp, with ages ranging from 13 to 78. According to TF134, 76 new members have entered the camp since the 2007 census, and 147 had entered between 2003 and 2007; there are 302 non-Iranian or undeclared nationality members, five known U.S. citizens in the camp, and several members with expired U.S. permanent residence. Some of the younger residents had been brought or sent to Ashraf by their parents.

-- TF134 guards the perimeter of Ashraf and maintains an entry control point to monitor the 300-500 local visitors (including approximately 250 workers) who typically enter the

camp each day. U.S. forces inspect goods coming into the camp but do not normally check visitors' identification.

-- There is no U.S. force or Iraqi police presence within the camp; unarmed MEK personnel provide internal security, maintain their own perimeter watchtowers as an "inner ring" and maintain their own entry control point. (Note: Minister Wijdan brought a number of concerns to the visit, among them a feeling that the MEK may be conducting terrorist activities outside the camp, and that they are monitoring and controlling access to the camp in order to prohibit family members from visiting. End Note.)

-- MNF-I is responsible for escorting MEK members to Baghdad on procurement and banking trips. MNF-I monitors their movements in Baghdad but not their financial and commercial transactions. In terms of logistics support, the MEK is self-sufficient, purchasing for delivery their own food and supplies. Each week MNF-I permits 4-5 trucks carrying goods (fuel, food, clothing, medicine and household supplies) for Camp Ashraf to accompany MNF-I convoys. The MEK have managed to get doctors to come to the camp to provide medical care. They have also been able to arrange private security to transport patients to Baghdad hospitals for CT Scans and advanced treatment.

TOURING CAMP ASHRAF

14. (SBU) The GOI/USG group toured the "industrial complex" (a light manufacturing facility for pre-fab trailers),

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mosque, kitchen, uniform tailoring department, men's facilities, and women's facilities at Camp Ashraf, taking the opportunity to talk to many MEK members about their concerns and demands.

15. (C) Efforts to speak to individual members without MEK leaders present were moderately successful. Initially the MEK leadership was present for meetings between GOI officials and MEK members, but midway through the tour Minister Wijdan requested that the MEK leadership depart. They complied, although the group nature of the events was such that no truly private discussions were possible.

16. (C) Throughout the day, particularly at the two "town hall" events, Minister Wijdan sought to assure the MEK members that the GOI will treat them humanely in accordance with Iraqi and international law and will respect their rights as individuals. She emphasized that they would need to see themselves as individuals and not part of the MEK because the GOI will not allow an armed or military group in Iraq. She said the GOI is an increasingly sovereign government and needs to have control over all territories in Iraq and stressed that U.S. forces will be leaving soon. She told them that the GOI would not acknowledge the right of the MEK organization to exist in Iraq, but while they stayed at Ashraf, they would be protected by the GOI as individuals under Iraqi and international law.

17. (C) MEK officials and individual members consistently expressed concern, even fear, over the planned transfer of security responsibility, repeatedly raising GOI spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh's June 17 announcement of a six point Council of Ministers Decree which declared (ref A):

-- The previous decision is emphasized which considers the MEK a terrorist organization that is to be expelled from Iraq.

-- Putting the current bases of the MEK in Iraq under the GOI's full control until the MEK is expelled from Iraq according to Iraqi Law.

-- Contact with the terrorist MEK organization by any Iraqi

organization, party, association, figures and foreigners in Iraq are forbidden, and whoever contacts the MEK will be prosecuted according to Iraqi Law for Eradicating Terrorism.

-- MNF-I should end its support to the MEK and should submit all their checkpoints and whatever are related to the members of the Iraqi authorities.

-- Activating court cases by Iraqi civilians against perpetrated elements of the MEK terrorist organization.

-- The GOI should cooperate with the ICRC to find radical solutions for the presence of MEK in Iraqi territory and to carry out these decisions.

18. (C) MEK members questioned whether Minister Wijdan's oral assurances were an authoritative reflection of GOI policy, and suggested that a formal public statement of assurances from the Prime Minister's office would help to assuage these concerns. (Comment: We recommended to Minister Wijdan that she ask the PM to allow such a statement to be issued in his name. End Comment.) They expressed concern that tough GOI talk on the MEK was already having a chilling effect on contact with Iraqi neighbors, local vendors, and customers for their light industrial products.

19. (C) Additionally, MEK members and officials repeatedly and emphatically stated that the GOI could not be trusted to withstand Iranian government pressure, and that U.S. forces were responsible for Ashraf's security due to the provision of "Protected Persons" status to its residents, and should remain so "until the last U.S. soldier leaves Iraq, we do not accept anything else." Embassy officers explained that the MEK would be better off working with the USG and GOI (and international organizations) on a gradual transfer of responsibility than in trying to avoid the inevitable. (Note: TF134 officers have long been delivering the same message to Ashraf residents. Privately, the MEK leadership has acknowledged this reality. End Note.)

10. (C) A few (mostly younger) members, and those with EU or Canadian citizenship or residency, said that they would "go home" if the GOI took over security. Other residents said they would remain in the camp and take their chances, even if it meant facing prosecution. Nobody would admit an interest in returning to Iran, and MEK officials claim that every camp resident interested in going to Iran had already done so. (Comment: TF134's August 2008 "census" of camp residents did not reveal any sentiment for accepting the Iranian

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government's offer of amnesty for rank and file members. The census asked residents whether they would feel concerned for their safety if returned to Iran: 3250 said yes, eight no. Asked if they desired to return to Iran, 3191 said no, 29 yes, and 44 a conditional yes: i.e. "only if it's safe." End Comment.)

GOI PLAN FOR POST-TRANSFER

11. (S) In a wrap-up session with USG officials, Minister Wijdan said she had concluded from the tour that it would be very hard for the MEK to see themselves as individuals and not part of an organization. She had been taken aback by the degree to which members still considered themselves a military organization, as exemplified by their wearing of uniforms. (Comment: In retrospect, it became clear that the minister was not aware that the 2003 MOU between Coalition Forces (CF) and the MEK, which led the Ashraf unit to disarm, required its personnel to remain in uniform so they could be distinguished from the local population. TF134 reports that MEK leaders say they are prepared to adopt civilian dress if so directed by CF. End Comment.)

¶12. (S) Minister Wijdan said next steps would include additional GOI visits to Ashraf to stress to the MEK that the GOI will take responsibility and will not allow them to remain an organization. Once the GOI takes over security responsibilities, she said that the PM will exert more control over Ashraf and will control all movements in and out of the camp, including restricting access by local Iraqis who work at the camp. Moreover, the GOI is troubled by the flow of funds into and out of the camp. The PM, she said, suspects (although without evidence, the minister pointed out) that the MEK is funding terrorist operations within Iraq against the GOI and wants to have full oversight of their funds and budget. (Comment: We are also unaware of any intelligence that would indicate the Ashraf residents, who have been unarmed and monitored by U.S. forces since 2003, are engaged in terrorist operations or support activity aimed at the GOI. End Comment.)

¶13. (C) For MEK members who renounce the organization, Minister Wijdan said the GOI wants UNHCR and ICRC to play leading roles in determining refugee status and helping them either return to Iran or settle in third countries. She also wants the ICRC to facilitate family visits to MEK members, as she is concerned by reports that some families are denied entrance to the camp by MEK security. (Note: The minister met with UNHCR officials on August 26 and asked for their assistance and involvement. Although UNHCR said it would not be involved at this time since the MEK are not refugees, it would play a role once members left the organization and qualified for refugee status. End Note.)

IRAQI TROOPS ARRIVE AT ASHRAF

¶14. (S) Towards the end of the visit, TF134 was notified that the PM had ordered the deployment of the 1st Battalion of the Iraqi Army (IA) "Baghdad Brigade" to Ashraf. Lead elements of the battalion, along with general officers from the Diyala Regional Command and the Commander of the Baghdad Brigade, met with TF134 Commander RADM Wright, Deputy Commanding General Quantock, and 504th Military Police Battalion Commander LTC Mullen at FOB Grizzly the evening of August 18. They explained that they had deployed upon orders of the PM to link up and coordinate with U.S. forces to prepare for the transfer of security responsibility for Camp Ashraf. The IA commanders said their orders specified that they were to protect the human rights of the residents.

¶15. (S) IA forces have remained outside the perimeter of the camp and are presently occupied with securing their own life support functions. The unexpected arrival of the IA sparked panic among MEK members who feared imminent radical change in the security regime. This has abated somewhat and TF134 is working to establish an atmosphere of open communication between the MEK and the incoming IA. (Comment: While we might have preferred time to alert the MEK to the arrival of the IA unit, its arrival may turn out to be helpful in forcing them to realize that the transition is coming. End Comment.)

WIJDAN ON NEXT STEPS

¶16. (S) Minister Wijdan with her MFA colleague will write a
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report for the PM and National Security Advisor Mowafuq Rubaie. She said that she wants ICRC and UNAMI officials to visit the camp before the next GOI visits in order to reinforce the message to the MEK that they will be protected by the GOI and will not suffer harm. Next, she would advise other top GOI officials to visit the camp to understand "logistics" and to discuss the political issues with the MEK. She emphasized her visit was focused on humanitarian

concerns. She said that the PM's assurances to the USG (as contained in the GOI diplomatic note of 18 August: ref B) would be turned into a written statement to show the MEK members that their protection is assured.

COMMENT

¶17. (S) The MEK members place much validity on official, written statements, and a PM letter stating the GOI's assurances for MEK members will help ease their concerns over their protection and safety. However, it is unclear whether the MEK realize and accept the degree to which their status will change and their freedom of action and movement will be tightly constricted when they come under the security responsibility of the GOI. The deployment of elements of the "Baghdad Brigade," which is considered to be loyal to the PM, signals that the GOI is trying to ensure that the transfer of security responsibility has close oversight by the PM's Office.

¶18. (S) Currently the MEK residents of Ashraf, who receive financial support from associates outside Iraq, are self-sufficient. Should the GOI completely close down the camp or cut off residents' access to funds, some entity would have to undertake to feed those residents (with the possible exception of those who might apply and qualify for refugee status and be taken under the wing of an international organization). Prior to 2005, the GOI provided bulk ration for 4000 residents in the camp. The GOI is in discussions on whether to resume this function. We are encouraging the GOI, initially via Minister Wijdan, to acknowledge the need to plan for the consequences of a financial squeeze.

¶19. (S) We believe Minister Wijdan is personally committed to implementing the GOI's humane treatment assurances for Ashraf residents and engaging closely with international organizations to support this. At the same time, her comments about GOI suspicions that the MEK at Ashraf continue to pose a terrorist threat are consistent with those of other GOI officials, who remain deeply suspicious of the residents.

We will continue efforts to involve international organizations/non-governmental organizations in joining us to monitor GOI actions in the months ahead, and to engage the GOI so that their actions reflect their written commitment to humane treatment. END COMMENT.

BUTENIS